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North Korean Belief Systems about South Korea after the Hanoi Summit

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Background and Purpose

- **Analyzing North Korean Perspectives on Policy towards South Korea, post-Hanoi.**
 - After the Hanoi Summit, Pyongyang has been refusing to take part in talks with Seoul.
 - It is thus important to analyze the policy implications of such an uncooperative and belligerent stance of North Korea.
 - Analysis of the North Korean regime's perceptions of the value of improving inter-Korean relations and its mindset on the optimal strategy and tactics towards the South.
 - Understand implications for the likelihood of improved inter-Korean relations and Seoul's strategy towards Pyongyang.

Research Results

- **Analysis of North Korean regime's belief systems about the South, and Policy Insights & Policy recommendations.**
 - Analysis of North Korean beliefs about South Korea and their policy implications.
 - Pyongyang has a very dim view of the value of improving relations with Seoul, and continues to believe that a strategy of conflict and risk-taking is the most optimal.
 - Pyongyang, however, also believes that the use of military force as a coercive method is highly ineffective.
 - Pyongyang is willing to risk deteriorations of inter-Korean relations if that means being able to achieve its own objectives. Thus, unless Seoul accedes to the key demands, it will be very difficult to swiftly improve inter-Korean relations.

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- Recommendations for South Korea's overall policy towards North Korea.
 - In the bigger picture, it may be possible to choose from maintaining the status quo, fully accepting Pyongyang's key demands, or a tit-for-tat approach to North Korean confrontations.
 - Considering the pros and cons of each option, for now it would be best to maintain the current policy trajectory, yet be flexibly disposed to any changes in Pyongyang's behavior.



In the aftermath of the failed Hanoi Summit of February 2019, Kim Jong-Un has been refusing any type of official talks and contact with the South Korean government. As a result, inter-Korean relations are deadlocked on all fronts. There is thus a great need for analyzing why North Korea refuses to engage in talks and formulating an appropriate response.

This study purports to understand the psychological status underlying the North Korean regime's non-cooperative stance. Specifically, focus is placed on finding North Korean policymakers' perceptions of Seoul's commitment to improving inter-Korean relations, as well as strategy, tactics, and policy decisions they judge to be optimal. Insights are then drawn for the likelihood of improvement in inter-Korean relations, and the policy direction toward Pyongyang that Seoul ought to take.

For this purpose, the current research used operational code analysis to identify the North Korean regime's belief systems about the South, differentiating between macro- and sector-level beliefs. Operational code analysis is a research method used to analyze the political belief systems of national political leaders, providing insights into predicting or explaining their foreign policy actions. And it is focused on the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of leaders. Philosophical beliefs are those held by the leader to assess the nature of the political universe and other actors. Instrumental beliefs are those that inform the leader's own preferences for political actions in terms of strategies and tactics. Table 1 shows the North Korean regime's general operational code profile derived using 'Verbs in Context System'.

Table 1. Operational Code profile for North Korean regime (Hanoi Summit ~ June 2020)

	Philosophical beliefs		Instrumental beliefs			Utility of Use of Force
	Environment for inter-Korean relations & Credibility of ROK Government	Likelihood of achieving strategic aims through improved inter-Korean relations	Optimal Policy towards South Korea			
			Direction of Strategy	Intensity of Tactics	Risk Acceptant	
Macro-level	Very Pessimistic (-0.67)	Definitely Low (-0.56)	Extremely Conflictual (-0.93)	Definitely Conflictual (-0.38)	High (0.69)	Very Low (0.02)
Politics	Moderate (-0.06)	Moderate (-0.07)	Extremely Conflictual (-0.94)	Definitely Conflictual (-0.39)	High (0.69)	Very Low (0.02)
Military	Extremely Pessimistic (-0.89)	Very Low (-0.75)	Extremely Conflictual (-0.89)	Somewhat Conflictual (-0.35)	High (0.68)	Very Low (0.01)
Economy	Very Optimistic (0.67)	Very High (0.61)	Definitely Conflictual (-0.44)	Somewhat Conflictual (-0.13)	Medium (0.48)	Low (0.05)
Socio—Cultural & Humanitarian	Moderate (0.00)	Somewhat Low (-0.33)	Highly Cooperative (0.86)	Somewhat Conflictual (-0.29)	Extremely High (0.89)	Very Low (0.00)

The results of Table 1 can be interpreted in the following ways.

First, from a macro-level perspective, North Korean belief systems suggest that Pyongyang will continue to risk conflict by acting in a belligerent manner, refusing all types of talks and negotiations with the South. Thus, the chances of a swift improvement in bilateral relations remain extremely low.

Second, there is a partial degree of cognitive dissonance within and across the two subsets - philosophical and instrumental beliefs. Such dissonance indicates that the possibility of improvements in inter-Korean relations is likely to differ depending on which issue or area is emphasized.

① With respect to politics, there is considerable likelihood of highly-aggressive posturing, yet a return to a more cooperative engagement



cannot be ruled out. A certain degree of uncertainty remains, however, given that philosophical beliefs about inter-Korean political cooperation lean negative, albeit weakly.

② With respect to the military, Pyongyang is highly likely to engage in various types of tension-escalating behavior, be it conducting artillery exercises and regiment-level field training exercises near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), or opening artillery gunport along the coast near the Northern Limit Line (NLL). Thus, unless Seoul takes unprecedented measures, it is near impossible to expect improvements in the military relationship between the two Koreas.

③ In the case of the economy, the results implies that North Korea will have a high possibility of maintaining a tactically prudent attitude and refraining from adventurous actions while employing a high-intensity conflicting strategy. Therefore, it can be evaluated that the possibility of recovery of economic relations between the two Koreas in the future is relatively high compared to other fields.

④ In terms of socio-cultural and humanitarian cooperation, externally Pyongyang is expressing a propensity for cooperation, presumably to improve its global image. But when actual substance is concerned, Pyongyang is highly likely to undertake actions that amount to political propaganda, coupled with various coercive measures that help maintain the secretive nature of the regime. All things considered, inter-Korean cooperation in this respect are expected to, at best, “muddle through”.

Third, we can observe a degree of cognitive dissonance arising from North Korean leaders' beliefs in the areas of politics, economy, and socio-cultural & humanitarian. Such cognitive dissonance may very well be the product of Pyongyang's extremely negative perceptions about the military relationship between the two Koreas. Therefore, if there were to be noticeable improvements in the military realm, then overall levels of cognitive dissonance would decrease. If military needs are met, then there would be increased 'internal consistency' in the minds of North Korean policymakers. This, in turn, may lead to positive knock-on effects in other areas, i.e., increased



cooperation in the non-military realms.

Fourth, even though Pyongyang retains the belief that a high level of risk-taking, conflict-provoking strategy is best-suited to deal with Seoul, it takes a very dim view of the utility of the use of force. This can be interpreted as that North Korea is in a state of trying to avoid the total collapse of inter-Korean relations.

Fifth, in the end, the results of this analysis show that North Korea has turned to a strategy to achieve its own policy goals toward South Korea first, even though it may suffer some damage to relations by using the South Korean government's aspirations for improving inter-Korean relations after the Hanoi North Korea-U.S. summit. In other words, leveraging high-intensity conflictual tactics, Pyongyang would seek to extract major concessions from Seoul, such as halting the ROK-U.S. combined military exercise, ceasing the build-up of cutting-edge military capabilities of the ROK, and resumption of inter-Korean economic cooperation. Only after receiving those concessions, Pyongyang would be willing to take actions to improve inter-Korean relations in the political, socio-cultural, and humanitarian realms.

The aforementioned research outcomes provide the basis for generating a variety of perspectives on how South Korean policymakers can engage their counterparts in the North. In the broader picture, the available policy options would be “Maintaining current policy (positive strategic patience)”, “Full acceptance of Pyongyang's key demands”, or “Tit-for-tat response to North Korean actions (negative strategic patience)”. Each option has its own pros and cons. However, under the premise that America and other members of the international community will maintain the current “denuclearization first, ease sanctions later” approach, Seoul would be best advised to respond flexibly to Pyongyang's actions, all the while adhering to the currently prevailing policies.

** These research findings are the personal opinions of the author (Park, Daekwang and Song, Whasup), and do not reflect the official view of the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis (KIDA).*